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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 000486

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: REACTION TO FREEDOM HOUSE REPORT: IT'S NOT
PERFECT, BUT ITS NOT PYONGYANG

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns.
Reasons 1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The release of Freedom House's annual report on worldwide freedoms has created a small furor in light of erroneous local press reports that respect for freedom in Russia had declined to being on the same level as North Korea, Cuba, and Libya. The MFA reacted angrily, as expected, but the report has also led to some reflection among activists over the current situation in Russia. While there is little doubt that the trend line on political freedom is downward, most activists recognize that personal freedoms are part of a complicated, sometimes ugly, mosaic of today's Russia; claims of a return to the USSR, however, are not supported by the facts. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Freedom House released its annual Freedom in the World rankings on January 31. Although the report's authors noted Russia was trending downward, they left its ranking unchanged from 2005, judging it "not free," with scores of 6 for political freedom and 5 for civil liberties, on a 7-point scale where 7 is the lowest possible ranking. The report's authors separately gave Chechnya the lowest scores possible in a separate category on "disputed territories." Kommersant, Ekho Moskvyy, Newsru.com and others incorrectly reported that Freedom House had relegated Russia to the lowest possible level for political freedom and civil liberties, joining Angola, Pakistan, Gabon, North Korea, Cuba, and Libya. Most likely, reporters mistakenly assigned Chechnya's scores to Russia proper, and Freedom House staff confirmed that much of the Russian coverage of the report was inaccurate.

¶3. (SBU) Responding to these inaccurate reports, the MFA called the Freedom House ranking absurd and said such assertions did not deserve a response. Ella Pamfilova, chair of the Presidential Commission on Development of Civil Society Institutions and Human Rights, told Russian press that the report would serve to undermine human rights defenders in the eyes of many in the GOR and suggested that there was a political motivation behind the ranking. Public Chamber member Anatoliy Kucherena called the report unfair and biased.

¶4. (C) Among our contacts, there was a consensus that political freedom and respect for civil liberties has lessened, but reports were greatly exaggerated. Opposition SPS leader Leonid Gozman commented to us that "the situation is much better than people think." Yukos was expropriated, and Khodorkovsky and his immediate circle persecuted, but private property and personal freedom remain. An opposition politician, Gozman enumerated, could stand in the middle of Red Square and yell epithets against Putin: they would be ignored by national television, dissected on Ekho Moskvyy, reprinted in most newspapers, disseminated thoroughly through the internet, and discussed at the Carnegie center, while the author of the remarks could travel widely, within Russia and

internationally, propounding on his thesis. The reason that international polls did not resonate, Gozman noted, is that anyone who came of political consciousness in the Soviet Union understood how profound, indeed revolutionary, has been the change since then. Russia is less free than under Yeltsin, less free than the Western countries that Russians like to visit, but "history is an oscilation, and not a line" and Russia,s long-term prognosis was still good.

15. (C) Demos Center's Tanya Lokshina, who had just spent two days coordinating hearings on Russia's counterterrorism policy and human rights abuses (septel), told us that she could not defend the Kremlin's policies and there were serious human rights problems but that to assert that Russia had reached the level of North Korea was ridiculous. Echoing much of Gozman's comments, she said that freedoms had been reduced compared to what they were before Putin, but Russia was not becoming the Soviet Union.

16. (C) International Republican Institute's Joe Johnson agreed that international reports on Russia's freedoms and liberties were overshadowed by the average Russian's conviction that the country had traveled a long way since the fall of the USSR. The efforts to "structure" political parties and elections in Russia now were still an improvement over the denial of human rights in the Soviet Union. As a whole, the Russian public had quickly embraced individual rights -- particularly those related to economic opportunity and freedom to travel -- and would not accept infringements on them. Russian politicians understood this, judging by their quick reactions to widespread protests when the public thought those rights were being threatened. He noted, however, that Russians did not generally share Western views on the rights of the minority.

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COMMENT

17. (C) The misguided official reaction to this year's Freedom House report is a tempest in a teapot. Nonetheless, the views presented by the activists cited above on the overall situation sound about right. While the downward trendline in political freedoms is clear and worrisome, the idea that Putin's Russia is backsliding into a neo-Soviet era is not supported by the facts. Nostalgia among most ordinary Russians for the poverty and chaos of the "freer" 1990s is fully in check. Some aspects of Russia today are truly ugly, but Russians do value their personal freedoms, individual economic opportunities and greater control over their lives that they now enjoy.

BURNS